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Author(s): Kai T. Erikson

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# SOCIOLOGY AND THE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

KAI T. ERIKSON

*Yale University*

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The relationship between sociology and history has interested scholars from both disciplines for a long time. By now a considerable library of materials is available on the subject, ranging from involved philosophical essays on the nature of the border line separating the two fields to ceremonial addresses of various kinds urging a greater volume of traffic across that line. Literature from the sociological side of the border, at least, has been almost unanimous in its insistence that sociologists should devote more attention to history—so much so that the argument would appear to have lost much of its urgency for simple lack of opposition. Yet, for all of that, sociology in the United States continues to lack historical focus. One can cite the works of men like Bellah, Bendix, Lipset, Merton, Moore, Nesbit, Smelser, Swanson, and Tilly to demonstrate that sociology sometimes reflects a strong sense of history; but these distinguished names only serve to suggest by contrast that most of what passes for sociological research in this country is not informed by much in the way of a historical perspective.

I should perhaps begin by explaining that I once spent a period of several years working with historical records, even though I was involved in a project that seemed eminently “sociological” to me at the time. Like others before and since, I went into that experience fully convinced that the study of history and the study of social life are logically different forms of scholarship. I emerged from the experience, however, in a more confused frame of mind. On the one hand, it seemed obvious that the traditional distinctions we usually draw between history and sociology do not pose any real barriers to the actual conduct of social research, whatever merit they may have in abstract principle. On the other hand, I thought there must be a number of other obstacles and inhibitions lying elsewhere in the structure of the field that make it difficult for a sociologist to deal comfortably with historical data, and this is the line of thought I hope to pursue in the remarks to follow.

## *Formal Distinctions*

The sociologist who elects to use historical records in his work is likely to approach the assignment with some misgiving. For one thing, if he has been recruited into the profession in the usual manner and has been exposed to the usual kind of professional training, he does not know very much about history. Beyond that, he carries

with him as part of his intellectual equipment a set of distinctions that confirm the separate identity of sociology by differentiating it from other fields like history, and yet it is not at all clear to him how these distinctions are supposed to orient his research.

The most familiar of these distinctions, of course, is that historians are interested in something called “the past” and sociologists in something called “the present.” As a practical matter, this simply means that students in each of the two fields customarily address themselves to different locales in time—a point of no importance here. As a methodological matter, however, the distinction is somewhat more complicated. Generally speaking, historians depend upon the passage of years to inform them what moments in the past have influenced the course of future events and are, for that reason, “historic”; to that extent, at least, historians can be said to rely on fate to determine not only what data shall filter down to them but what portion of the past shall engage their attention. Sociologists, on the other hand, are apt to be more suspicious of fate. They are generally encouraged by the logic of their method to generate their own information, extracting it from the contemporary social setting themselves because they hope to reach *behind* the historical appearance of things and have no reason to suppose that the information they require will be deposited in the ordinary run of historical records. In theory, then, historians should find it easier to make sense of data that have been seasoned by the effects of time, and sociologists should find it easier to make sense of data over which they can exercise some immediate measure of control.

This distinction, if it ever meant anything, is almost surely losing force, partly because it is no longer clear that historians and sociologists rely upon different sources of information. Historians are beginning to generate their own data by procedures developed in the social sciences, and sociologists, in turn, are frequently deriving their material from documents of precisely the sort employed by historians. Even if this were not the case, the fact that sociologists are currently in the business of data-gathering has changed the whole character of historical data anyway: sociological reports are now sent to the archives for storage along with state papers and official records, and there they have simply become a new species of historical document. In general, it is difficult to see how a reasonable line can be drawn between the two fields on that score alone.

Yet the feeling persists within both disciplines that the kinds of intellectual orientation necessary for studying the past are somehow different from those necessary for

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This is the MacIver Lecture presented at the annual meetings of the Southern Sociological Society, Atlanta, Georgia, in 1968.

studying the present, and one must look for the sources of that feeling in the professional climates of the two fields themselves. The past has generally been studied in an atmosphere of scarcity: the traditional task of the historian has been to sift through a finite supply of data as thoroughly and as carefully as he can, and the working arrangements he has devised for that purpose—the quiet reserve of his workshops, the vigor of his arguments over seemingly small matters of texture and detail—can be both unfamiliar and a little intimidating to the sociologist. The present, however, is generally studied in an atmosphere of abundance: the traditional job of the sociologist is to take rough and approximate samplings of the data as they splash around him in an endless flow, and the working

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arrangements he has fashioned for that purpose—the abstractness of his vocabulary, the impersonality of his procedures, the spare geometry of his charts and tables—can be strange and sometimes offensive to the historian. Carl Bridenbaugh, the distinguished American historian, was once horrified when a sociologist asked him, “what is *your* method of sampling?” The question may have been shrewder than Bridenbaugh recognized, but the notion that one can examine a problem responsibly by selecting a tiny fraction of the available evidence lies far outside what more traditional historians would define as proper scholarship. Sampling is the strategy of persons who work with vast universes of data; it is a strategy of plenty.

As a result of these differences in atmosphere, students often overestimate the degree to which the working arrangements of the other field are governed by some hidden method of approach, some implicit logic not readily apparent to outsiders. For what it is worth, I can report that I drifted through the beginning stages of the study mentioned earlier with the idea in mind that there must be ways to “do” history which I could learn if I only consulted the right scholar or read the right book; and now, several years later, I frequently encounter students of history looking for inside hints on how to “do” sociology, as if some manageable recipe were involved. Students often hesitate to move across the border between the two fields because they mistake the professional postures they confront on the other side for a formidable and exclusive set of methods.

A second and more telling distinction between the two fields is an old and honored tradition that sociologists should concern themselves with the more *general* properties of social experience, the everyday patterns of activity that appear again and again in the life of the social order, while historians should concern themselves with those *specific* moments in the flow of time that have in-

fluenced the character of an age or tempered the course of the future. According to this academic division of labor, the sociologist's assignment is to look for regularities and correspondences in the conduct of men in the hope of discovering general “laws.” The historian's assignment, in turn, is to look for the unique and distinctive in the conduct of men in the hope of capturing as accurately as possible what actually happened in the past. Sociology is nomothetic, history idiographic.

This distinction makes a good deal of sense in the abstract, but it is sometimes difficult to know what to do with it in any given case. On the one hand, it seems perfectly reasonable that some events in the past (decisive elections, for example) should attract the attention of historians because they literally “made” history, while other events (say the voting activities of housewives in Omaha) should attract the attention of sociologists precisely because they are undistinguished acts, representative acts, passing instances of some more inclusive social pattern. On the other hand, it is important to recognize that human actions themselves are neither generic nor specific. Every event has properties that can be subsumed under a more general heading; if this were not so, we would be unable to identify the event in the first place. Yet every event is also peculiar to *some* historical sequence, whether it be the life history of one of those housewives in Omaha, the emergence of Western civilization, or a sweep of time as broad in scale as the evolution of the human species. The problem with this division of labor is that it obscures the extent to which each of the two fields employs the perspective attributed to the other. Historians generalize all the time, as numbers of them have pointed out, and sociologists are forever dealing with particularities no matter how energetically they cut and trim the data to fit the abstract logic of their procedures.

The fact is that whenever a sociologist looks carefully at a human scene, he is observing a unique moment in historical time as well as an instance of some broader regularity, and thus the social landscape he surveys does not differ in any appreciable way from the landscape viewed by the historian. Why is it, then, that sociologists and historians usually produce works that are so distinct from one another in style and content? One reason, presumably, is that each attends to different features of the common landscape and reports on different activities taking place within it. A sociologist is more likely to note the structure of the scene than the character of its leading actors, he is more likely to be interested in the activities of civil society than in the actions of governments, and, in general, he is more likely to be concerned with some underlying pattern in the events he is studying than with the moments of crisis: the sudden shifts of fortune, the contests among commanding adversaries, the ironies of fate, and all the other human dramas around which the conventional historical narrative is organized.

Still, this is not the only reason why accounts written by historians are so easy to distinguish from those written by sociologists. Even the barest analysis of sociological prose would probably confirm the suspicion held by many critics both inside and outside the profession that the ab-

stract quality of sociological work is conveyed as much by the prevailing conventions of sociological reporting as by the contents of the reports themselves. Take titles, for example: sociology must be one of the few scholarly fields where a study of hospital rates in Massachusetts could be called *Psychosis and Civilization* or where a study of young men and women in industrial England could be called *Youth and the Social Order* (to cite two works I admire). Or take prefaces: it is a standard practice in sociological reporting to introduce a set of findings by simply naming the academic species to which it hopefully belongs, whether or not any further connections are drawn between the two ("the following is intended as a contribution to the sociology of . . ."). Or the presentation of data: even where an author is careful to note that his evidence on delinquency comes from a working-class section of Scranton during the third and fourth months of a steel strike, the next person to mention that evidence is as likely as not to treat it as a "finding" about delinquency everywhere, a standard item in "the literature."

There are other usages, too, which have the sometimes inadvertent effect of wrapping sociological merchandise into nomothetic packages. In the interests of protecting the anonymity of their informants, for example, sociologists frequently omit from their published reports exactly the kind of identifying information that would place the study in its proper historical context. When one invents names like "Western Hospital" or "Southern City" for his research sites and then is purposefully vague about persons and dates and locations, he is introducing a note of generality and abstractness into the finished product that does not accurately reflect the substance of the findings themselves. The presumption, of course—sometimes stated, more often not—is that the site in question is somehow representative of other locales and other times; yet the researcher does not ordinarily know whether this is the case or not, and if he simply states or implies that the scene he has studied is "typical" and then deals only with those features that make it appear so, he is making it almost impossible for the reader to arrive at his own reasoned conclusion. The problem for the responsible investigator, then, is twofold. He cannot distinguish the regular pattern from the unique happening unless he is careful to study both, in which case his research procedures are necessarily similar to those of the historian. And if he hopes to show the reader how he made that discrimination, he must include a good deal of local color and "historical" detail in his report.

So these are two of the formal boundaries dividing sociology from history—the notion that sociologists are anchored to the present by the special logic of their methods and the notion that sociologists have a particular investment in the more general contours of social life. I would say, to repeat, that these distinctions do not in themselves represent a very compelling difference between the two fields at the operational level; but I would also say that they sometimes serve to mask a network of other barriers that lie below the visible surface and help keep the sociologist confined within his own academic preserve. These barriers have not been declared in philosophical essays on the nature of knowledge: they are built into what we

might call the "professional reflexes" of the sociologist—those habits of mind and temper that become the hidden products of a sociological apprenticeship and constitute the normative climate of the discipline. We have noted two or three of these implicit barriers. It is time now to consider several others by backing away from the subject for a moment and returning to it along a different line of approach.

### *Professional Reflexes*

Sociology, in common with several of the social sciences, claims the entire range of human experience as its proper subject matter and thus does not observe very many jurisdictional limits in its search for relevant data. Because of this, the niche occupied by sociology in the structure of academic life is sometimes difficult to portray. When a sociologist is asked to describe his profession, he is likely to say in terms that sound a little vague to students in neighboring fields that sociology is a "perspective" rather than a subject matter, an "approach" rather than an inventory of known facts. What he means by this, normally, is that sociologists do not have a natural territory in the world of human phenomena and can only be distinguished from students in other fields by the way they pursue data—by the way their senses are conditioned, the way their imaginations are tuned, the way their minds are disciplined.

To think sociologically, then, is not simply a matter of rehearsing certain theories or developing certain skills: it is a matter of learning new devices for sorting out the

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various details that crowd one's consciousness and of learning new ways to determine what impressions in the world of human experience are worth one's attention. When a sociologist studies a conversation between two people, for instance, he is presumably trained to note the patterning of the relationship rather than the contributions of the individual participants—the words and gestures that are drawn from a common cultural vocabulary rather than those that suggest personal idiosyncracies. He is trained to look at the *space between* the interacting pair rather than at the spaces they occupy as separate persons, to visualize the two as a single social unit rather than as discrete objects in space that happen to intersect for a passing moment. He sees the actors as reflections of one or another abstract position in the social order—as occupants of statuses, players of roles, or representatives of class interests or ethnic traditions.

This (or something like it) is what sociologists normally have in mind when they talk about their perspective or approach. When we say that groups of scholars share a common discipline, we are suggesting, among other things, that they turn their attention to the same

universe of detail and try to screen out from their line of vision all other details that might interfere with that concentration. It is the essence of all specialization, presumably, that students will deliberately limit the number of variables they take into account for the explicit purpose of sharpening their focus on those they accept as their proper concern; in that respect, at least, the disciplined eye is one that sees both more and less than the untutored eye.

The difficulty here is that members of a discipline do not always recognize the price they have paid to achieve this clarity of focus, and they sometimes act as if the variables they have screened out in an attempt to improve their concentration have conveniently disappeared in the meantime. In the case of sociology, it might be argued that our ability to appreciate the effects of general social forces on human conduct has often been purchased at the cost of reducing our awareness of *personality processes*: the social man who appears in many of our reports, at any rate, is a creature who does not seem to be governed in any important way by unconscious impulses and who yields his autonomy rather easily to the demands of the social environment. Or, again, it might be argued that our ability to appreciate the influence of culture on human conduct has been purchased at the cost of dulling our sensitivity to *biological processes*: indeed, it is taken for granted in many sociological circles that serious discussions about the effect of genetic factors on behavior are not only scientifically unsound but politically suspicious.

These professional screens have played an important part in the emergence of sociology and will continue to do so as long as we remember what they are. But there is another screen in common use which probably serves to impair rather than improve the quality of sociological vision: the ability sociologists have developed to perceive relationships between persons and events and institutions that coexist in time by muting their sense of time altogether. I do not mean to suggest by this that sociologists are less aware of the passage of years than other men, or that dour theorists from places like Columbia and Harvard have somehow managed to force time out of our imagery in the interests of promoting a structural-functional view of the universe, as some commentators have implied. I mean, rather, that it has been one of the professional reflexes of the sociologist (in the United States, at least) to more or less freeze time in order to get a clearer and more leisurely look at the patterns of relationship obtaining at a given moment. In this sense, sociologists are often poorly equipped to handle historical data, not simply because they are unresponsive to the persisting pleas that they learn to think more historically but because the conceptual language of the field and the standards of relevance that are built into its models do not always lend themselves conveniently to that purpose.

It follows, then, that one of the more important hidden barriers dividing the two fields is a matter of conceptualization and terminology. As a general rule, sociologists and historians tend to invest their energies differently when they look at *connections between* the variables they study, the one spending more time on relationships that are essentially *lateral* in time and the other on relation-

ships that are essentially *sequential*. This may seem something less than a profound insight, but sociologists who work with historical data in a sustained way often discover that a large part of the vocabulary they have been trained to use when portraying the connection between social objects makes sense principally when those objects coexist. Sociologists who incline toward a structural-functional vision of social life have a vocabulary at their disposal—interaction, exchange, balance, equilibrium, function, consensus, and the like—that does not translate easily into narrative figures. Sociologists who lean toward a somewhat less symmetrical view of social life approach historical data with much the same disadvantage; terms like coercion, conflict, tension, ambivalence, antagonism, and dissensus share with terms featured in the language of structural-functionalism the fact that they deal almost entirely with objects present at the same moment in time. I do not mean to imply that the schools of thought in which these vocabularies have developed are themselves frozen in timelessness, for some of our richest work on “institutionalization,” say, or “socialization”—two areas of study that depend very much on a sense of time—have come out of the same conceptual frameworks. But it is probably fair to point out that the everyday vocabularies of sociology are very largely geared to lateral connections in social life.

The various formulations one finds in American sociology under the heading of “social change” may be a case in point, for the very *idea* of change can sometimes sound awkward when expressed in conventional sociological prose. Many of our standard descriptions of change—check any current text—draw attention to successive stages in the development of a given institution or structure, almost as if the only way to introduce the element of time into our calculations is to visualize several different stages of equilibrium or several different states of conflict stacked one on top of the other like so many building blocks. A historian, on the other hand, is more inclined to simply take for granted the fact that change takes place in the life of the social order—that people mature, that institutions age, that generations replace one another, that one event gives way to another in a relentless sweep of time. His language deals with continuities, ours with discrete shifts in the arrangements of society. His language is tuned to growth and decline as genetic processes built into the very nature of social order, ours is tuned to the linkages among social objects that happen to fit together in the same temporal frame.

Another of the hidden barriers between sociology and history, closely related to the first, is that each field entertains a somewhat different set of notions as to what constitutes a plausible “explanation.” To *explain* a fact, of course, means to *account for it*—to align it with other facts in such a way that the appearance of this one seems logical, reasonable, perhaps even inevitable. In general, historians are likely to feel that a given outcome is explained if they can relate a credible story about the sequence of events that led up to it or the motives that impelled it, while sociologists are likely to feel that an outcome is explained if they can trace its connection to other institutions and forces in the surrounding environ-

ment. I do not want to get into this enormously complex problem at any length, but I do want to note one of its less visible consequences for styles of academic work—namely, that historians and sociologists tend to fall back to different methodological shelters whenever their data prove thin and inconclusive. When a historian is unsure of his data, he is invited by the conventions of his trade to fill in the missing information with a fairly deliberate exercise of sympathy and intuition, on the theory that the facts of the case are forever lost and that, in any case, the imagination of a disciplined professional mind is itself a research tool of no mean power. It is surely no accident that history is the one social science recognizing a muse. When a sociologist is unsure of *his* data, however, he is under a certain constraint from the conventions of his trade to withdraw to a more secure and sometimes more trivial ground where his position can be defended and his conclusions substantiated. The records of history cannot always be counted on to furnish information of the sort a sociologist thinks he requires to explain his findings, and this is often the realization that quickens his retreat from the awkward past to the more accommodating present.

The most subtle and yet most compelling of the hidden barriers dividing the two fields, however, is that scholars who deal with the historical past usually visualize their own relationship to the data they study in a different way than scholars who deal with the social present, and I shall devote a moment to this subject because I suspect it relates importantly to the kinds of collaboration we can reasonably expect in the future between sociology and history.

Sociologists often proceed as if they have experienced the data they use in their studies at first hand: after all, they can reach out and touch the walls of the institutions they are interested in, speak to the people they are trying to understand, observe the social scenes they are writing about, and consult the records of the age in which they live. Because we have prominent examples of field work to cite, we sometimes forget that working sociologists are often just as remote from their sources of information as are historians, since their data are so often gathered for them by intermediaries of one sort or another: student assistants, institutional surveys, official agencies, and so on. Nevertheless, sociologists are often inclined to take a certain methodological comfort from the illusion that they remain close to their data, and as a result they are sometimes rather vague and unreflective about the kinds of concern that belong in the realm of epistemology when they are actually engaged in research. Whatever we say when we teach courses on the “sociology of knowledge,” we generally approach data with the idea that the world is pretty much as it seems and that the evidence we happen to obtain about the world is a fair enough representation of the way things are.

When an investigator turns to historical data, however, and loses his anchor in the present, he is in a more precarious position—if only because he cannot sustain any further illusion of sensory contact with the human experience he is studying. His evidence is secondhand, his subject matter remote; this more or less forces him to be more thoughtful about the evidence at his disposal and

more skeptical about his relationship to it. To begin with, he is fated to work with documents of uncertain ancestry and must ask several questions about the material even before he examines it. Why were these particular scraps of information recorded? Who wrote them down and why? How accurate an observer was the writer? How well did he represent the mood and spirit of his age? This is only the beginning of the problem, for the one quality all these documents have in common is their survival; and even though a researcher has complete faith in the authenticity and reliability of the documents, he must wonder by what law or accident they came to be preserved. They are not the random remains of a dead age, like the debris found at an archeological site. Every generation of men that has lived meantime has served for a period as custodian of those records, and thus the surviving library of

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materials is in many ways a record not only of early years but of all the intervening years.

To use the example with which I am most familiar, a large number of documents are available to the student of seventeenth-century New England, rich in texture and broad in coverage; but one cannot spend more than a few hours in their company without wondering whose history they speak of. Not only were they originally composed by men with a vested interest in the events they were reporting, they have been passed along to us by a succession of other men, each of whom has taken a turn sifting, rearranging, and even rewriting those materials. The surviving records, then, register not only what impressed John Winthrop in the early years of settlement, but what Cotton Mather regarded as worth remembering in the second half of the seventeenth century, what Thomas Hutchinson considered “historic” in the eighteenth century, and what whole generations of chroniclers and antiquarians decided to place on the shelves in the nineteenth century. The attitudes as well as the fingerprints of many men are attached to this (or any) set of documents.

Even this is not the end of the problem, for any investigator who learns in this demanding school how one generation of persons can influence the work of another will sooner or later begin to wonder how he, in his own turn, is liable to influence the work of students yet to come.

In short, working with historical materials requires an approach to data tempered by a kind of skepticism and uncertainty—an awareness of self, perhaps—that comes naturally to many experienced historians but fits uneasily among the professional reflexes of many sociologists. Historians are aware that their own minds are the spheres in which the past comes alive again and that the

data of their researches are converted into "histories" by a process involving personal qualities of insight, sympathy, and imagination. I do not mean by this that every journeyman historian stays awake at night worrying about the degree to which his personal susceptibilities intrude upon the larger character of his work, but rather that it is generally understood throughout the discipline that written history is bound to reflect the talent and temper of the mind that produced it. When a historian reviews the available data and draws new conclusions from them, for instance, the work he publishes is likely to be called an "interpretation"—suggesting both that the intellectual posture of the author is an important feature of his work and that the work itself is apt to be replaced in time by

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another interpretation. Should someone conclude from this that historians are subject to all the private subjectivities and social biases that flesh is heir to, the historian can reasonably respond that this is not always a handicap. If he is an interpreter of history for his generation, he may find it helpful to share the perspectives of his generation; if as a scholar he relies upon some measure of insight and intuition to breathe life back into pasts that are forever dead and gone, he may find it fully appropriate to employ the arts of the dramatist as well as the skills of the scientist. This argument, at least as it appears in some of the more idealistic discussions of historical method, sometimes trails off into a form of mysticism that most sociologists and many historians find uncongenial, but the main point is widely accepted throughout the profession.

It is probably unnecessary to add here that considerations of this sort have not figured prominently in sociological discussions of method. The energies of those sociologists concerned with method have been largely spent in an attempt to neutralize whatever qualities of insight and sympathy an investigator brings to his work—and this on the basis of two very questionable assumptions: the first, that proper scientific procedure requires one to systematically reduce one's own influence on the data; the second, that it is humanly and technically possible to do so. We shall return to these two assumptions in a moment.

### **History and Method**

It has become more important to take a careful look at the boundary dividing sociology and history because the traffic across that line has been increasing over the past several years. Historians have moved across the border in search of new techniques to help them handle the large masses of data that are increasingly being rec-

ognized as their main concern and in search of new conceptualizations to help them order the past in more "social" terms. Sociologists have moved across the border primarily because they are interested in the rich caches of data located in the historians' archives. The rapid pace of change in the modern world, among other things, has encouraged sociologists to view the present as history, and they are beginning to search in the records of the past for older parallels to the processes of industrialization and urbanization and revolution they see in the world around them. In a sense, then, what sociologists have tried to gain from their commerce with history has been additional information that can be analyzed by standard sociological methods and used in the service of standard sociological hypotheses.

The final paragraphs of this paper will suggest, however, that sociologists might profit from a different form of commerce with history—one in which they consider the degree to which *historical methods* can help in the analysis of *sociological data*. Perhaps "methods" is not the proper term: some historians bristle at the suggestion that their work is governed by anything so strict and binding as a method, and many sociologists are only too ready to endorse that judgment. Still, scholars who study the past in a systematic way can be said to share a certain cast of mind, a certain set of professional reflexes, and I would like to propose that these qualities can broaden and inform the scope of sociological inquiry.

One way in which sociologists might profit from paying closer attention to the historical method is to acquire a sharper sense of the relationship between social events over time. In order to appreciate how the institutions we study are moulded by the passage of years, we probably need to learn how to think in narrative terms, to develop a feeling for the temporal nature of social forces; and the only way we are likely to attain these skills is to become more "historical" ourselves.

C. Wright Mills, among others, has insisted that the sociologist is really a contemporary historian. Whether he is studying a school district or analyzing election returns or observing the activities of a religious sect or conducting experiments with laboratory groups, the sociologist is observing the history of his own age as well as looking for broader indicators of regularity and law. Unless he becomes aware of this, he runs the risk of losing not only his historical but his *sociological* command of the social scenes he is studying. For one thing, a setting that appears to reflect general social properties may later prove to have been but an instance of some wider arc of change. As one looks back on some of the truly remarkable studies coming out of American sociology a generation or more ago, for example, they sometimes seem a little antiquated and (to use a curious but meaningful expression) *dated*. This is not because the methods or the vocabulary employed in those works have become obsolete, but because it is clearer to us than it was to the people who originally wrote them that they reflect the age in which they were produced—an age of immigration, an age of prohibition, an age of depression and collapse. These studies offer particular insights into the history of places like urban Chicago and rural North Carolina as well as



general insights into the anatomy of society; and yet it is not at all evident that the sociologists who did those projects were aware of the difference—or, indeed, that investigators on the scene are themselves *ever* aware of the difference. It is easy to imagine that a number of contemporary classics now honored as monuments to the craft will seem equally “dated,” equally anchored in time and place, once another generation has passed. If so, it will demonstrate again that the greatest difficulty we face in determining whether a given set of findings should be counted as “generic” or “specific” is that, like most of the other data of history, their actual contours only become apparent at a distance.

This problem becomes all the more complicated when we note that sociologists are continually changing the history of the settings they study in the very act of paying attention to them. However representative and typical an institution may appear at first glance, it takes on a special character by simple virtue of the fact that an investigator has elected to introduce himself into it; and the investigator is liable to misunderstand the information he obtains unless he sees *himself* as a unique historical event in the life of the institution and remains aware that the report he writes may change the structure he is viewing.

In both of these senses, then, the sociologist is something of a participant historian whether the title appeals to him or not, and it would seem reasonable to suggest that he can best understand his data if he accepts both roles.

A second way in which sociologists might profit from paying attention to the historical “method” is to take a somewhat closer look at the relationship between an observer and his data. As suggested earlier, sociologists often seem to derive a certain comfort from the illusion that their evidence is close at hand and that their procedures are largely automatic. There are living populations of subjects to draw upon, tables of significance values to consult, and elaborate hardware to employ in the processing of data, and on the whole we are not especially troubled by the degree to which our own posture as social beings intrudes upon our results. Yet none of this can protect us from the fact that sooner or later the data we use have to be sifted through the soft tissues of a human mind, and when this occurs the matter of how these tissues operate and how they relate to the rest of the social order becomes an important technical concern rather than an artistic whim. This is an issue to which historians (or philosophers of history, at any rate) have devoted a good deal of attention, but it is an issue that has provoked little systematic thought in sociology.

It is probably fair to observe that sociologists who worry about this matter are regarded by their fellows as soft and humanistic, while sociologists who do not—who think that their use of standard measures and mechanical procedures protects them from subjective bias—are regarded as hard and scientific. Yet this is very likely a misreading of the scientific ethos. If a theoretical physicist were to listen in on a professional conversation about sociology and history, he might conclude that a skeptical historian in the tradition of Croce or Collingwood is in many ways more scientific than is his positivistic colleague in history

or his neighbor in sociology—not because his standards of investigation are more precise or his conclusions more amenable to verification but because his approach to data allows for a margin of indeterminacy and uncertainty and takes for granted that the subjective condition of the observer is an objective fact about the research setting itself. Our physicist might very well want to give the historian credit for understanding something that sociologists sometimes overlook—that any research finding is a datum about the investigator as well as a datum about the subject at hand.

This brings us back to the subject of *discipline*. Whatever else the term may mean, a discipline is a set of ideas shared among a community of scholars as to what constitutes a proper order of evidence, a proper method of investigation, a proper standard of criticism. These notions, presumably, do not have any special authority beyond the fact that they happen to make sense to the men who hold them, and to this extent a discipline must be understood as a normative order, a system of belief, a cultural product.

One of the important functions of a discipline is to represent standards of performance against which scholars can evaluate their own research, a process that often goes under the heading of “developing objectivity” or “being scientific.” In many respects, this can be a highly misleading way of phrasing the issue. Any individual in a research setting brings with him from the different corners of his mind a potential for distortion and bias—inclinations that are related to his own private life and experience, inclinations related to his social class position and ethnic background, and so on. When we talk about making someone “more objective,” we are generally talking about submerging his private subjectivities into the subjectivities of a larger collectivity—shifting the moral center of gravity, as it were, from a private individual to a wider group.

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For example, it is standard procedure in several of the social sciences to enlist the help of a panel of judges whenever a researcher’s impartiality is called into question and then to be reassured by the fact that those judges agree. What happens in this case, of course, is that the biases of one researcher have been washed away by the biases of several judges—experts, perhaps, and shrewd observers, but representatives of the same general sector of the moral order from which the researcher himself has ordinarily come. When the grayest elders of a tribe testify that polyandry is a law of nature, we call it culture; when the leading spokesmen of a religious movement insist that some article of creed is based on revelation, we call it



ideology; but when five or six sociologists agree that the behavior of a subject falls into a particular category, we call it science. All of this can put the sociologist in a curious position: while he may be the first to argue that the things "everyone knows" are often a result of cultural conditioning, he is sometimes slow to realize that professional agreement on a method of procedure or a set of findings may amount to the same thing.

A discipline, then, reflects the best sense a community of scholars can make of the way they work and the best rules they can fashion for handling the data they view as their responsibility. That there may be room in these arrangements for bias of one sort or another should go without saying: the problem for a mature profession is to arrange its affairs as reasonably as it can *knowing this to be the case*. And this can prove to be a highly sensitive matter because a discipline—like any human group—is always struggling against the tendency of some of its members to settle for a seemingly simple and lasting solution to the ambiguity of its position. On the one hand, there is the very real danger that a discipline will dissolve into a kind of mindless antinomianism where everyone does his own thing and listens only to the sounds of his own voice. On the other hand, there is the equally real danger that a discipline will harden into a brittle orthodoxy where ritual rules and formulae long outlast the logic responsible for their invention.

Historians have been struggling with both of these inclinations for a number of years, but to one sociologist

looking in from the outside (and perhaps with an outsider's readiness to idealize) it would seem that the academic atmosphere in which history is studied often reflects the easier balance between the two. At his best, a person who works with historical documents comes to accept as a working principle the fact that the eyes with which he sees have all the defects of the age in which he lives, and that other eyes will see things differently as a matter of course; yet at the same time he accepts the conventional lore of his discipline as a provisional source of wisdom, a base from which to operate. He manages to resist the attractive notion that every man is his own historian, responsible only to his own convictions and impulses, and he manages to resist the equally attractive notion that history is a discipline governed by natural laws of inquiry.

Sociology in the United States has generally leaned in the more positivistic of those directions, developing a form of scientism that no longer seems to resemble the natural science models from which it derived. There have been unmistakable signs in recent years, however, of a swing in the opposite direction—toward a species of radical skepticism in which persons distrust their own intelligence and all the established apparatus of sociology for fear of the various class and racial and ideological biases that might be hidden within them. We may hope that historical experience and historical consciousness can help us to find a responsible stance somewhere between the two extremes.

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